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FEATURES

Sonja Davies, below, has temporarily pushed aside her trade union activities to spend more time fighting for peace. She tells SUZANNE POLLARD what the word peace means to her.

# A fire that burns for peace

EXTRA

**P**EACE is as much about women being able to walk home safely at night as it is about nuclear disarmament and nuclear-free zones, according to peace activist Sonja Davies.

"We can't go on being snug about our peace policies if we are becoming a violent country," she says. "I think people are finally beginning to link crime and peace — because they are linked. The growing crime rate is giving people a heightened awareness of the whole need for peace, and an understanding that violence begets violence."

Long active in peace, trade union and women's causes, Ms Davies heads New Zealand's 17-member United Nations International Year of Peace committee. She has temporarily pushed aside her trade union activities to concentrate on her chief passion.

"Peace is my most overriding passion because it's the most urgent. What's the point in having a good wage-fixing system, and a decent living wage and improved health and welfare services if we're on the verge of being annihilated."

"You don't stop fighting on those fronts, but you have to put your main efforts into trying to encourage people to see peace as the important issue."

Travelling around the country addressing public meetings, schoolchildren and anyone else who invites her, she has found tremendous support for peace initiatives.

"I'm just so amazed as I go around the country by this terrific groundswell of people beginning to realise New Zealanders have a big part to play in the whole issue of peace."

"That's the most exciting thing, finding people in small towns who really are away from the mainstream and feeling the need to do something for peace very strongly."

Typical of the dozens of let-

ters that come across her desk at Peace House each week is one from a young mother in the King Country, asking what she can do to help achieve international peace and a safe future for her son.

"I think most people still tend to feel it's hopeless and when they know the enormous size of the problem they are inclined to say, 'Well, what can I do? Leave it up to them.'

"But there is now a growing number of people who say we can't just leave it up to the politicians any more, we've got to make quite sure they know that we want them to do something positive."

Ms Davies wants more time and money spent on trying to understand the causes of violent behaviour, and initiatives to correct it.

"We need to find out why people are violent. There are all these theories about it being violence in film; violence in television series; within people's homes; different attitudes of parents today toward each other and their children."

"Or is it because materialism has insidiously crept in so that people don't feel they've arrived any more unless they've got a video?"

She believes the cause is probably a bit of all those things.

"The macho New Zealand image that has been built up as being so desirable and which is instilled in our boys early on has got to change. They're still supposed to be the ones who go and do the hard things and the nasty things, and if they don't they're not real men."

"I think we've got to say there are different degrees, that it's much better to be a responsible, caring person. We've got to change the whole image. It doesn't mean surrendering sport or anything like that. What it really means is carrying the caring, peaceful message through into everyday life."

Ms Davies refuses to accept the argument that conflict is in-



man nature and that there will always be wars and violence as a result.

"Men and women aren't born with aggression. They're born with an instinct to protect their own — but that's not aggression, and psychologists have proved that. We shouldn't be doing anything that is going to instil aggression in people."

Peace education can begin at pre-school age, Ms Davies says. By teaching children co-operative methods of play, and teaching them not to hit others when things don't go their way, the groundwork can be laid for a

peaceful, caring, non-aggressive adult.

Children are more aware now of the dangers of nuclear war and the need for international peace than they have ever been, she believes. But they don't usually seem able to make the link between violence in the community and the absence of world peace.

The pessimism that many people now express about the world's future is something she identifies with. She has no faith in the current leadership of the nuclear powers, and is especially concerned about the huge

amount of power held in such a few hands.

"I think we're probably in one of the most dangerous times we've ever been in. I think any time when you've got so much power in the hands of so few that there is the danger first of all of an accident or error. Secondly, the sorts of nuclear weapons that are now being developed are so terrible that we just can't contemplate what it would be like if they were used."

"I think power is the enemy. There's nothing truer than the expression that absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is the big-

gest enemy."

But Sonja Davies has a strong belief in the power of ordinary people to effect change, and to force the world's leaders to take notice by a sheer weight of numbers.

"You just have to keep hoping that the world will see reason and try to find other ways out, to talk harder and longer and better and find people with real commitment to doing it."

She believes women generally have a greater commitment than men to working for peace because of their nurturing role. But she gets frustrated by the fact that women's views are seldom represented when it matters.

"It's women who have been prominent in the peace movement all the way through, but they're not at the negotiating tables and that is where it counts. That's where the power is, so women aren't there. It's one area where we really do need quota systems, I feel."

"Women need to get into the international peace scene. It's starting to happen, but it's very slow and I don't think we've got much time."

Women like the Greenham Common protesters in England have shown the tremendous courage of their sex, she says. "They've stayed on day in and day out, and that takes real courage — not like just taking a day out to go on a demo."

As well as speaking to people up and down the country about peace, Ms Davies spends a lot of time talking to politicians about money. The International Year of Peace Committee is grateful for the Government help it has had, but needs a lot more money to its job effectively and reach all parts of the country, she says. Money is needed for more staff and publicity and to organise the peace conference being held in Nelson in August.

The trouble is that peace, unlike the disabled, children and other recent United Nations causes, is political, and that can make people a bit reluctant to put their money where their mouths are.

But she believes this will change.

"It's a part of our growing up as a nation . . . we've got to realise that of course peace is political, but in the best possible way. It's the best politics there can be to make the world safe."